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THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

MICHAEL TAUSSIG

ROUTLEDGE
NEW YORK • LONDON

and violence do their little duet. "The tradition of the oppressed," he wrote at the end of the 1930s, "teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule." This was not only an attempt to designate a reality—one so common in Colombia and other Latin American countries and now, in 1991 so vivid in parts of the USA too. It was also designed to provoke a radically different way of seeing and reacting to history, because in a state of siege order is frozen, yet disorder boils beneath the surface. Like a giant spring slowly compressed and ready to burst at any moment, immense tension lies in strange repose. Time stands still, like the ticking of a time-bomb, and if we are to take the full measure of Benjamin's point, that the state of siege is not the exception but the rule, then we are required to rethink our notions of order, of center and base, and of certainty too—all of which now appear as state of sieged dream-images, hopelessly hopeful illusions of the intellect searching for peace in a world whose tensed mobility allows of no rest in the nervousness of the Nervous System's system. For our very forms and means of representation are under siege. How could it be otherwise?

To take social determination seriously means that one has to see oneself and one's shared modes of understanding and communication included in that determining. To claim otherwise, to claim the rhetoric of systematicity's determinisms and yet except oneself, is an authoritarian deceit, a magical wonder. Those of us who have had to abandon that sort of magic are left with a different wondering; namely how to write the Nervous System that passes through us and makes us what we are—the problem being, as I see it, that everytime you give it a fix, it hallucinates, or worse, counters your system with its nervousness, your nervousness with its system. As far as I'm concerned, and I admit to going slow with these NS matters, this puts writing on a completely different plane than hitherto conceived. It calls for an understanding of the representation as contiguous with that being represented and not as suspended above and distant from the represented—what Adorno referred to as Hegel's programmatic idea—that knowing is giving oneself over to a phenomenon rather than thinking about it from above.[8] And it calls for a mode of writing no less systematically nervous than the NS itself—of which, of course, it cannot but be the latest extension, the penultimate version, the one permanently before the last.

Michael Taussig, "The Nervous System"

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TERROR AS USUAL: WALTER BENJAMIN'S THEORY OF HISTORY AS STATE OF SIEGE

Terror as the Other

A question of distance—that's what I'd like to say about talking terror, a matter of finding the right distance, holding it at arm's length so it doesn't turn on you (after all it's just a matter of words), and yet not putting it so far away in a clinical reality that we end up having substituted one form of terror for another. But having said this I can see myself already lost, lost out to terror you might say, embarked on some futile exercise in Liberal Aesthetics struggling to establish a golden mean and utterly unable to absorb the fact that terror's talk always talks back—super-octaned dialogism in radical overdrive, its talk presupposing if not anticipating my response, undermining meaning while dependent on it, stringing out the nervous system one way toward hysteria, the other way toward numbing and apparent acceptance, both ways flip-sides of terror, the political Art of the Arbitrary, as usual.

Of course, that's elsewhere, always elsewhere, you'll want to say, not the rule but the exception, existing in An-Other Place like Northern Ireland, Beirut, Ethiopia, Kingston, Port au Prince, Peru, Mozambique, Afghanistan, Santiago, the Bronx, the West Bank, South Africa, San Salvador, Colombia, to name but some of the more publicized from the staggering number of spots troubling the course of the world's order. But perhaps such an elsewhere should make us suspicious about the deeply rooted sense of order here, as if their dark wildness exists so as to silhouette our light, the bottom line being, of course, the tight and necessary fit between order, law, justice, sense, economy, and history—all of which them elsewhere manifestly ain't

got much of. Pushed by this suspicion I am first reminded of another sort of History of another sort of Other Within, a history of small-fry rather than of the Wealth of Nations, as for example in a letter in the *Village Voice* in 1984 from an ex-social worker in the state of Colorado, in the USA, commenting on an article on Jeanne Anne Wright who killed her own children. The social worker notes that it was axiomatic that the "deeper you dig, the dirtier it gets; the web of connections, the tangled family histories of failure, abuse, and neglect spread out in awesomely unmanageable proportions." When the social worker asked a young mother about the burn marks on her nine-year old daughter, she replied in a passive futile voice that her husband used a cattle prod on the girl when she was bad. Then she smiled, "as if it was the oddest thing," saying "It hurts too. I know 'cos he uses it on me sometimes." They lived "anonymous and transitory" in a refurbished chicken coop on a canal-lined road. One afternoon this social worker was taking the last of another woman's four children from her home when the woman leapt up and pulled down her pants to show him where her ex-husband had stabbed her in the buttocks. "Just as suddenly," he writes, the woman "realized what she had done and began to cry and to laugh, somehow at the same time, and somehow to mean both." And he concludes by saying "I am left with the impression of lives as massive, dense, and impenetrable as those nodes of collapsed matter out of which nothing escapes and whose only measure is what they absorb and conceal."

But what about the histories of the Big Fry, the Histories of Success? Are they so removed from this violent world whose only measure is what it absorbs and conceals? In talking terror's talk are we ourselves not tempted to absorb and conceal the violence in our own immediate life-worlds, in our universities, workplaces, streets, shopping malls, and even families, where, like business, it's terror as usual? In particular, as we zig-zag between wanting to conceal and wanting to reveal, might we not suddenly become conscious of our own conventions of coordinating power and sense-making and realize, as Walter Benjamin put it in his last writings written on the eve of World War II, that:

> The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly recognize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable ("Theses on the Philosophy of History").

In other words what does it take to understand our reality as a chronic state of emergency, as a Nervous System? Note the concept; please take care to note the issue before us. Not a knee-jerk application of postmodern anti-totalitarianism bent on disrupting an assumed complicity between terror and narrative order, but an opportunistic positionless position which recognizes that the terror in such disruption is no less than that of the order it is bent on eliminating.

Terror is what keeps these extremes in apposition, just as that apposition maintains the irregular rhythm of numbing and shock that constitutes the apparent normality of the abnormal created by the state of emergency. Between the order of that state and the arbitrariness of its emergency, what then of the center—and what of its talk?

Talking Terror 1

I had been invited by one of our more august institutions of the higher learning to talk on the terror associated with the Peruvian Amazon Company in the early twentieth-century rubber boom in the Putumayo area of Colombia. Before the talk I lunched with my host, a scholar, older than myself. With remarkable verve and flair for detail he compared different historical epochs for their amount of terror, concluding, over dessert, that our century was the worst. There was something weighty, even sinister, about this. We were drawing a balance sheet not just on history but on its harvest of terror, our intellect bending under the weight of fearful facts, and our epoch had come in first. We felt strangely privileged, in so far as we could equate our epoch with ourselves, which is, I suppose, what historical judgement turns upon. And in drawing our grim conclusion, were we not deliberately making ourselves afraid, in ever so sly a way enjoying our fear? But I myself find I am now a little frightened even suggesting this possibility. It seems plausible, yet over-sophisticated, mocking both fear and intelligence.

Tennis balls thwacked. The shadows thrown by the Gothic spires lengthened as the afternoon drew on. One could not but feel a little uneasy about the confidence with which terror was being mastered over linen napkins, a confidence shielding the unspoken fear the university community had of the ghetto it had disappeared several years back—"disappeared," a strange new word-usage in English as well as in Spanish, as in El Salvador or Colombia when someone just vanishes off the face of the map due to para-military death squads. The university in the USA is of course remote from that sort of thing. Death squads, I mean. But it is well known that some twenty-five years back this particular university, for instance, had applied relentless financial pressure on the surrounding ghetto-dwellers and that during that time there were many strange fires burning buildings down and black people out. There was hate. There was violence. Nobody forgot the dead white professor found strung up on the school fence. The university came to own the third largest police force in the state. Together with the city administration it changed the traffic pattern, impeding entry to the area by means of a labyrinth of one-way streets. An invisible hand manipulated what it could of public culture and public space. It became unlawful to post certain sorts of flyers on university notice boards, thus preventing certain sorts of people from having any good reason for being in the vicinity. Thus, in time, while preserving the semblance of democratic openness, the university came to reconstruct the ghetto into a middle class, largely white, fortress within an invisible *cordon sanitaire*. Terror as usual, the middle class way, justified by the appeal to the higher education, to the preservation of Civilization itself, played out right there in the fear-ridden blocks of lofty spires, the fiery figures of the burning buildings, and the calm spotlights of policemen with their watchful dogs. We remember Walter Benjamin: "no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."

My thoughts drifted to a late nineteenth-century story written by Joseph Conrad's close friend, the larger than life eccentric Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham. In this story, "A Hegira," Cunninghame Graham relates how on a trip to Mexico City in 1880 he visited eight Apache Indians imprisoned in a cage and on public view in the castle of Chapultepec. As he left the city to return to his ranch in Texas, he heard they had escaped, and all the long way north he witnessed elation and pandemonium as in town after town drunken men galloped off, gun in hand, to track down and kill, one by one,

these foot-weary Indians—half-human, half-beast, decidedly and mysteriously Other—slowly moving north through the terrain of Mexico, constituting it as a nation and as a people in the terror of the savagery imputed to the Apache. Yet when I'd finished telling the tale my host looked at me. "Do you know how many people the Apaches killed and how many head of cattle they stole between 1855 and 1885?" he asked. It was as much a challenge as a question, the sort of question you asked looking down the sights of a gun where reality equals a target. The implication was clear; there was "good reason" to fear and kill those Apaches. "But there were only eight of them, in the whole of Mexico, alone and on foot," I replied. "And a dog they'd picked up."

But later on, to my surprise, when the seminar got under way, my host, once so fiery and eloquent on the topic of terror, so in command of his vast history-machine, fell silent as the grave, slumped into the furthest recess of his padded chair. A young tenured professor chaired the occasion in a don't-mess-with-me manner, refusing to allow me to begin with the summary I'd prepared. "That won't be necessary!" he repeated archly, asking nearly all the questions which, like the host's reaction to the Apache story, were not only aimed at making sense of terror as somebody's profit, but in doing so furthered the terror he purported to be explaining. The sad greyness of the late afternoon spread through the room. Pale and forbiddingly silent, the graduate students sat as sentinels of truth for oncoming generations. Why were they so frightened? What did they feel? Maybe they felt nothing?

Reluctantly I met my host for a cup of coffee two days later at the university. He was insistent and invoked all sorts of nostalgia to smooth over unstated tensions. But what a climax! Where was the genteel comfort of his imagined past of heroic intellectuals in the sub-basement of what was said to be a perfect copy of an Oxford college where we now sat holding undrinkable coffee from a slot machine while four or five gangling young men from the ghetto horsed around menacing one another, and the clientele, teasing of course, as they played unbearably loud music from the jukebox? The host leaned forward against the noise. The arteries pulsed in his stout neck. "Have you read Bordovitch's work on the Stalin trials, published in Paris in the fifties?" he shouted.

"No," I had to confess.

He leaned forward again. "Do you know why the prisoners admitted to

crimes they hadn't committed?" he demanded with a sharp edge to his voice. "Because they were deprived of sleep—for weeks at a time," he thundered. "In white cells with the light on all the time!"

He sat back, glowing like a white light himself, grimly satisfied, even a little exultant and happy now that he had pushed terror's dark murk well away from those politically staged performances where confusion and confession worked to each other's benefit. He insisted on driving me the five blocks to where I was staying. "Here your car is your tank," he said.

Talking Terror 2

In the Republic of Colombia in South America, an official State of Emergency has been in force, now on, now off, now on again, for as long as most people can remember. The timing and rhythm of the application and enforcement of this measure gives us some idea of the operation of states of what Bertolt Brecht surveying Germany in the thirties called "ordered disorder," and since decades Colombia has been defined as being in a state of chaos such that predictions of imminent revolution, a blood bath, or a military dictatorship have been made on an almost daily basis. Today, in a total population of some 27 million, being the third largest in Latin America, with widespread assassinations striking, so it is said, some thirty people a day, with 500 members of the only viable opposition party, the Uniòn Patriòtica, gunned down in the streets over the past two years, with an estimated 11,000 assassinations carried out by the more than 149 death squads recently named in the national Congress over roughly the same time period, and with over 1,000 named people disappeared (surely but a small fraction of the actual number)—there can be no doubt that a situation exists which is no less violent than it is sinister, and that its sinister quality depends on the strategic use of uncertainty and mystery around which stalks terror's talk and to which it always returns.

But is this situation widely understood, within or outside the country, as a State of Emergency in Benjamin's sense? Is it, in other words, seen as the exception or the rule, and what political and indeed bodily consequences might there be in constantly harping on the ideal of Order as in the prominent discourse of the State, the Armed Forces and the media with their incessant

and almost ritualistic reference to the "state of public order," particularly when it seems pretty obvious that these very forces, especially the Armed Forces in an age as defined by Pentagon theorists as one of "low intensity warfare," have as much to gain from disorder as from order—and probably a good deal more? Indeed, in the case of the Armed Forces, disorder is surely intrinsic to its modus operandi wherein the arbitrariness of power is practiced as an exquisitely fine art of social control. Furthermore, what does it mean to define such a situation as exists in Colombia as *chaotic*, given that the chaos is everyday, not a deviation from the norm, and in a strategically important political sense is a disordered order no less than it is an ordered disorder? What does it mean, and what does it take to envisage a society as *breaking down* to the point of *dying*—as the headlines in the January 24, 1988, edition of *El Diario* of New York puts it for Colombia—when there is every reason to suggest that this state of emergency is most decidedly not the exception but the rule for this particular nation-state (if not for many others as well)? In the postmodern world, as the state, the market, and the transnational corporations enter into a new configuration of arbitrariness and planning, might not the very concept of the social, itself a relatively modern idea, be outdated in so far as it rests on assumptions of stability and structure? In which case what is all the talk about order about?

Looking at the social world in the tensed yet highly mobile way Benjamin encouraged us to do with his dictum about the constancy of the state of emergency, I think we can start to understand the flow of power connecting terror's talk with the use of disorder through assassination and disappearing people. This understanding requires knowing how to stand in an atmosphere whipping back and forth between clarity and opacity, seeing both ways at once. This is what I call the optics of The Nervous System, and while much of this is conveyed, in a typically oblique manner, in the notion of the normality of the abnormal, and particulary in the normality of the state of emergency, what needs pondering—and this is our advantage, today, in this venue, with *our* terror-talk which automatically imposes a framing and a distancing-effect—is the violent and unexpected ruptures in consciousness that such a situation carries. This is not so much a psychological as a social and cultural configuration and it goes to the heart of what is politically crucial in the notion of terror as usual.

I am referring to a state of doubleness of social being in which one moves in bursts between somehow accepting the situation as normal, only to be thrown into a panic or shocked into disorientation by an event, a rumor, a sight, something said, or not said—something that even while it requires the normal in order to make its impact, destroys it. You find this with the terrible poverty in a Third World society and now in the centers of U.S. cities too, such as Manhattan; people like you and me close their eyes to it, in a manner of speaking, but suddenly an unanticipated event occurs, perhaps a dramatic or poignant or ugly one, and the normality of the abnormal is shown for what it is. Then it passes away, terror as usual, in a staggering of position that lends itself to survival as well as despair and macabre humor. It is this doubleness of social being and its shock-changing that the Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht used, but in reverse, so as to problematize the cast of normalcy sustaining the reality-effect of the public sphere. *Seismology*, a superior form of semiology, is what the critic Roland Barthes called this technique of Brecht's.

Terror's talk in such circumstances fluctuates between the firmly sensed and usually quite dogmatic certainties that there indeed exists a reason and a center, on the one hand, and the uncertainties of a diffuse, decentered randomness on the other. Take for instance the editorial of one of the country's main daily newspapers, *El Espectador*, 26th of February, 1986, entitled *El Desorden Publico*. First there is a breathless listing of the "successive acts of terror" that have "shaken the country" in the past week . . . the mounting attacks on journalists, one being killed in Florencia, another in Cali, the confrontation of police with Indians in the remote desert peninsula of the Guajira where eight people were killed, the assassination of ten peasants in the municipality of La Paz in Santander, the blowing-up of oil pipe lines now amounting to 65 million pesos, the assassination of a young Unión Patriótica activist in Cauca, the attacking of a police post between Pereira and Armenia by a guerrilla unit of the EPL, which killed one policeman and wounded four others, massive peasant demonstrations in the frontier Department of Arauca, the escalation of drug trafficking and, on top of all this, according to the editorial, the double-game of the guerrilla, taking peace but making war.

"This, in broad strokes," continues the editorial, "is the internal situation of the country, convulsed and explosive" such that it seems as if

> there might be an intimate connection between the diverse factors that conspire against the maintenance of peace and public security. But although that may not exist, there are so many repeated outbursts from different battlefields that, wanting to or not, the forces that operate against public peace converge with equal and destructive impetus to the common task of destruction in which they find themselves engaged.

Terrible talk, indeed.

Forces become disembodied from social context as we enter a world in which things become animated, paralleling the impossibly contradictory need to both establish and disestablish a center, a motive force, or a reason explaining everything. Strangely this Nervous System acquires an animistic, even anthropomorphic, quality—factors conspiring, forces converging, forces finding themselves engaged in common destruction—and just as strangely, in the entire litany of terrifying *forces* recorded in the editorial, there is this terrifying absence of any mention of the *Armed* Forces of the State itself. Could these latter be the truly invisible dread that centers the Nervousness of the Nervous System whose semiosis involves not so much the *obvious* meaning but what Roland Barthes called the *obtuse* meaning of signs?

In the many written works by the foremost spokesman and guru of the Armed Forces, General Fernando Landazábal Reyes, terror's talk assumes the situation prevailing in Colombia is decidedly part of an order, a global order of cosmic confrontation between democracy and communism in which poor Third World countries are the first to be fractured and where the front line of combat is drawn. In his rendering of reality, in books such as *The Price of Peace* and *Social Conflict*, one senses quite acutely the comingling and fluctuation between the Positivist Style of the hard fact, the Abstract Empiricism (as Sartre would put it) of the diagrams depicting patterns of circular causation between poverty, morality, injustice, violence, and so forth, together with the spellbinding wonder of the metaphysics of patriotism, death, order, and hierarchy. As I see it these latter are the very things that create and control a sense of fixing together with a sense of slippage, especially obvious and important in the case of death, so finite a connection with the infinite, and even more obvious in the case of the new tactic of *disappearing* which, as Julio Cortazar pointed out in the early eighties, thinking not only of the 30,000 disappeared in Argentina, creates a new circle to

Dante's hell in that it combines the terrible fact of loss with the ever-present hope that the disappeared will tomorrow, the next day . . . re-emerge. Hence mothers are reported as saying that they wept tears of joy to find the dead body of their daughter or son, because at least then they were sure. But that is the exception. For most it's a dream world, which decidedly puts "magical realism" in a new light, as when they rush to a site where, in a dream, a friend has seen the disappeared. As Fabiola Lalinde, who last saw her son, a member of the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party, being put onto a truck by the Colombian Army, on the 3rd of October, 1984, puts it: "If the days are difficult, the nights are torture, especially when I dream of [the Spanish is *con*, thus meaning dreaming *with*] Luis Fernando."

> Because more than dreams they are real in that I see him return home with the smile that he always has, together with his tranquility and ease, and when I ask him where he's been and he's about to answer, that's when I always wake up, in that part of the dream. It's so real that at the very moment of awakening I have no idea what's happening or where I am, and to return to reality is sad and cruel after having had him in front of me. At other times I spend the night running through bush and ravines, searching amongst piles of cadavers, witnessing battles and Dantesque scenes. It makes you crazy. And this happens to the whole family, as well as to his friends. Even the neighbors have told me many times that they dream of him.

And our dreaming? For are we not neighbors too?

As for hard facts, General Landazábal is adamant, at least until September of 1986, that evidence indicating that the Armed Forces is behind many if not most of the assassinations and disappearances in Colombia is false. Questioned in *La Semana* by Antonio Caballero (whose name now appears on the Medellin Death List) regarding his statement that the only paramilitary groups in the country were the guerrillas, the general replied that while it was beginning to appear to him that there might perhaps be some sort of organization, even a nationally organized one, whose function was to assassinate members of the Unión Patriótica (by far the most popular left-wing party in Colombia), he really had no idea about this. Moreover, he went on, it was infamous to connect the Armed Forces with the assassins now supposedly so abundant in Colombia in the wake of the cocaine trade.

> That would be to enter into the most tremendous contradiction with the professional morality and honor of the Armed Forces. It is said that there is a "dirty war" going on, but the Armed Forces do not participate in that. They combat subversion with all the means of the Constitution and the Law, but not by paying assassins on motorbikes or placing bombs. That would be infamous, and we cannot tolerate such infamy to be mouthed:

In Gabriel García Márquez' novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold,* Santiago Nassar walks the hot Colombian town during the night's revelry unaware that he is being pursued by two men armed with knives passionately committed to killing him. A question of honor. It's a small enough town for its inhabitants to sense something strange. They see the armed men searching from place to place, yet they can't believe that they will really kill—or rather they believe and disbelieve at one and the same time, but proof comes sure enough with Santaigo Nasar's bloody disembowelment—all of which I take to be paradigmatic of what General Landazábal refers to as the "dirty war" which he says "is said to be going on." Of course the point of such a war, of the phrasing of such a war, which is also called by some national commentators a war of silencing, is that as the General says it is "said to be" going on which means, in political and operational terms, that it is and it isn't—in just the same way as the abnormal is normal and disorder is orderly and the whole meaning of the relatively modern term "society," let alone the meaning of the social bond, suddenly becomes deeply problematic. After all what does it mean to have a society at (undeclared) war with itself? "In Colombia," my twenty-year-old friend from one of the poor sugarcane towns of the Cauca Valley, Edgar, constantly assured me with smug finality, "You can't trust anyone."

We were in a bus in 1981 heading into the frontier province of the Putumayo, reading a *Chronicle of a Death Foretold,* and I commented how strange an air of reality the tale conveyed, everybody sensing yet not believing what was about to happen. "Ah *profesor,*" he replied, "but there's always one who knows."

In the murk, an eye watching, an eye knowing. Here you can't trust anyone. There's always one who knows. Paranoia as social theory. Paranoia as social practice. Note the critically important feature of the war of silencing is its geographical, epistemological, and military-strategic decenteredness—yet we cannot but feel that it is organized from some center no matter how much the general denies his knowing. The leaders of the Unión Patriótica

say this (undeclared) war (which is said to be going on) is the outcome of the Pentagon's plan for Latin America, the infamous "doctrine of national security" which we can read about in the general's books where it is presented in a favorable, even redemptive, light.

Side by side with this doctrine, and the symmetrical paranoid circles of conspiracy traced around it, there is this new type of warfare that has come to be called "low intensity conflict" whose leading characteristic is to blur accustomed realities and boundaries and keep them blurred. That is another eye to contend with, grotesquely post-modern in its constitutive contingency.

Talking Terror 3

And now we start to feel this eye watching in other places as well. Hearing, too. The *tira* is what the students in the university of Bogotá called it, meaning spy, and it was, they intimated, right there in the classroom. Curiously this particular word for spy—the *tira*—also means throwing, and its opposite—pulling. And as if that isn't strange enough, *tira* is also used to mean fucking. All this makes for a curious network of associations, granting us some rare insight into the erotics not only of spying but of the terror-machine of the State as well, with its obscure medley of oppositions, seduction, and violence.

Sappo, frog, is the term used for the informer in the sugarcane towns in western Colombia, reminding me of the frog's role in sorcery and of its slimy habitat between earth, sky, and water, where it croaks songs of love and war yet, both like and unlike the informer, is suddenly muted when people pass by. When you walk through the cane fields at night—as only the peasants, cane-workers, and the occasional conspirator, revolutionary organizer, and anthropologist ever would—you become the auditory equivalent of a sensitive photographic plate, registering under the black canopy of the immense skies the deafening silence of suddenly stilled sound. And the frog? I guess it's all ears too.

But who knows from whence come these terms for spies and whence they go? Their awkwardly constellated meanings register a compound of slime and ominous quiet, no less obscure, and no less pointed, than the Death Squads themselves. In these suddenly muted fields of power the

neatness of the symbol itself gives way to the rapidly pulsing underbelly, the pushing and pulling, of Nervous Systematicity.

And for the poor young men of Colombia, which is to say for the majority of young men, there is the eye of the *libretta militar* or miltiary pass, possession of which means that one has performed the eighteen or twenty-four months military service demanded by the state. If you don't have it, the authorities can pick you up as they please, and most employers will refuse to hire a man without one. At the dance-halls in Bogotá where the young unemployed and working class congregate on Saturday nights, it was not uncommon in 1986 for the police to drag off those without the *libretta,* often housing them down in the courtyard of the police station and leaving them there locked in the freezing night, especially if they couldn't come up with a satisfactory bribe. Every time a bus is stopped by the police or the army, the men are made to present their papers. Every time a *reten* or barrier is erected around what the forces of public order deem disorder, those who wish to pass have to present their papers, and to be without them may one day cost your life. This eye is merciless for the poor young men of the Republic who thereby become not only victim but victimizer, ensuring terror's normalcy.

Take the case of Jairo with whom I was speaking in one of the sugarcane plantation towns to which I have been returning every year since 1969 in the Cauca Valley in Western Colombia. Several months back he had finished his compulsory military service and now had his *libretta militar.* We started talking about the army and the guerrillas, about him being on patrol in the *cordillera central.* Did he ever get a chance to talk with the enemy? No! There was a young guy he once knew who lived down the street, though. And he waved his hand carelessly. "Why are they fighting?" I asked. He struggled for words. "It's to do with the government," he said eventually. "The guerrilla are against unemployment."

> "Well. What about that?"
> "It's bad because they are communists. They're against democracy."

He told me the same thing a few months later when, having searched for seven months he landed a construction job in Cali—a job that paid four dollars a day except that transport and lunch took close to half of that and the job would last only seven weeks so that the employer could avoid the

social security costs that apply after eight weeks employment. That's the democracy he was defending. And it took him seven months to find that job—with his *libretta militar*. I've known him since he was a tiny boy and his mother is an even older friend of mine. He's exceptionally sweet and gentle. The other day he was washing my two and half year old boy's hair, all giggles and froth.

> "Do you get a chance to talk with the guerrilla?" I asked.
> "When we capture them."
> "Do they talk?"
> "We make them sing."
> "Do many sing?"
> "Most."
> "What about those who don't?"
> "We kill them. The *comandante* orders us to. We tie their hands behind their backs and stuff a wet towel over the mouth so that when they breathe they feel as if they're drowning. Most sing. Or else we put stakes up their fingernails. Those who lie, we kill, like when they tell us where the enemy is but they're not there. A lot depends on the *comandante*."

"And when the guerilla catches one of our officers," he added, "he's cut into pieces." All this transpired in the most matter-of-fact way, just like we'd been earlier talking of the tomatoes he was transplanting.

We got to talking about the "cleaning" or *limpieza* of Cali, that incredible process in which beggars, prostitutes, homosexuals, transvestites, and all manner of street people supposedly involved in crime and petty cocaine dealing were being wiped out by pistol and machine gun fire from pick-ups and motorbikes. That is what one heard every day. But obviously not just those sort of people were affected. Everyone was scared. Anyone could be a target. Students in Cali told me that merely with the sound of a motorbike they would hide themselves, and few people went out at night. While there is reason to distinguish this "cleaning" from the more conventionally defined political assassinations, there is also something they have in common—apart from the creation of terror through uncertain violence—and this has to do with the horrific semantic functions of cleansing, creating firm boundaries where only murk exists so that more murk can exist, purifying the public sphere of the polluting powers which the dominant voices of society attribute to the *hampa* or underworld whose salient political feature lies in its being strategically borderless—invisible yet infilitrating—but decidedly Other;

prostitutes, homosexuals, communists, left-wing *guerrilleros*, beggars, and what I guess we could call the dark threatening mass of the undeserving poor—which, when you think about it, doesn't leave too many people in the upperworld. In the fearsome logic of the political unconscious "the cleansing" or *limpieza* brings to mind supermarket shelves of endless cans of soap powders and car wax that daily scrub and polish this malnourished land. Now issuing forth a stream of cadavers, disfigured in bizarre ritualistic forms often derived from U.S. television imagery and commodities such as pesticides like Kan-Kill, this cleansing fervor is not without a certain genealogy and conscious manipulation.

As regards the genealogy, harken back to the representations of the *hampa* or criminal underworld of Havana in early twentieth century works of the celebrated Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in which crime is reduced to criminality and criminality is seen as the natural outcome of being black and practicing Santería. The underworld is the phantasmagoric paranoid construction of the ruling class, and with regard to the manipulation of this fertile imagery in Cali—like Havana, capital of sugar, slums of blacks—harken to Chris Birkbeck's study of the media and images of crime there in the seventies before the death squads had emerged in the mid-eighties. Comparing the newspaper accounts of crime with what he found by hanging out with police and prisoners while he was living in the slums, he found nothing to validate the ubiquitous assumption that an organized underworld existed outside of the imagination created by the press (or, I would add, created by the more important medium of the radio). Not only were the accounts in the newspapers extraordinarily exaggerated but, to my way of thinking, it was as if they were designed to create and reproduce a tropical version of the Hobbesian world, nasty, brutish, and short, in which (as my friend Edgar was almost ready to remind me) "you can't trust any one"—and thus create a city of the swamp shrouded in a nebulous atmosphere of insecurity, truly in a state of emergency.

Together with this Hobbesian fear in which it is precisely the individualization and freaky unexpectedness of violence that is strategic, there is a no less critically important countermove to claim an organized, structured, essentialist core to the dread—as with the notion of an organized underworld, a magically potent race apart, inhabiting both a metaphorical and an actual geographical zone within the city. This of course is the ultimate

postmodern elusiveness, claiming both centeredness and decenteredness in a social struggle combining meaning and senselessness with torture and death, and Birkbeck could note in the press as early as 1977 the urgent call for a clean-up, for the *limpieza*—harbinger of our time now when the metaphor became blasting fact. "The city urgently needs aseptic treatment," said the daily newspaper, *El Occidente,* echoing previous demands for "eradicating foci of criminal activity," for "purification of the environment," and for "cleaning the center." What we have to understand, then, it is not merely some horrific process in which imagery and myth work out from a political unconscious to be actualized, but rather a socio-historical situation in which the image, of crime, for instance, is no less real than the reality it magnifies and distorts as terror's talk.

And now Jairo was talking, telling me about his having to resign, while in the army, from a special force he belonged to for three months in Palmira, the town across the river Cauca from Cali. As he put it, the mission of this force was to cruise around in taxis and on motorbikes—powerful motorbikes, he noted—so as to kill criminals, drug addicts, and *sicarios* or professional killers. The soldiers in his unit received booklets with photos of the people they had to kill, and they undertook target practice shooting at human forms from motorbikes and phony taxis. They never wore uniforms and their hair was grown longer than regulation. To kill they would get as closer as possible, with a colt .45 or a 9-mm pistol. There were eighteen of them, plus four sub-officials and one captain. They did most of their killing at night but worked through the city during the day getting to know their victims' habits. There were about fifty people on that death list.

It was straightforward. And only three weeks before, to the day, the general was quoted as vehemently denying any possible connection whatsoever between the army and death squads.

Taking Terror 4

Above all the Dirty War is a war of silencing. There is no officially declared war. No prisoners. No torture. No disappearing. Just silence consuming terror's talk for the main part, scaring people into saying nothing in public that could be construed as critical of the Armed Forces. This is more than the production of silence. It is silencing, which is quite different. For

now the not said acquires significance and a specific confusion befogs the spaces of the public sphere, which is where the action is.

It is this presence of the unsaid which makes the simplest of public-space talk arresting in this age of terror—the naming by the Mothers of the Disappeared in public spaces of the name of disappeared, together with their photographs, in collective acts acquiring the form of ritual in which what is important is not so much the facts, since they are in their way well known, but the shift in social location in which those facts are placed, filling the public void with private memory.

The point about silencing and the fear behind silencing is not to erase memory. Far from it. The point is to drive the memory deep within the fastness of the individual so as to create more fear and uncertainty in which dream and reality commingle. Again and again one hears this from the mothers of the disappeared, like Fabiola Lalinde who dreams that her son, last seen being taken on a truck by the Colombian army, has returned to her. Just as he's about to answer her question, "Where have you been?" she wakes up and he's not there. "It's so real," she says, "that at the very moment of awakening I have no idea what's happening or where I am, and to return to reality is sad and cruel after having him in front of me."

"The true picture of the past flits by," as Benjamin expressed a cardinal principle of his philosophy of history, and "even the dead shall not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious." Other nights she races through bush and ravines hunting for her son in piles of cadavers.

Silencing serves not only to preserve memory as nightmare within the fastness of the individual, but to prevent the collective harnessing of the magical power of (what Robert Hertz, in his classic 1907 essay on the collective representation of death) called "the unquiet souls" of the space of death—the restless souls that return again and again to haunt the living, such as the souls of those who died violent deaths. This haunting contains a quotient of magical force that can be channeled by the individual, as you can witness in the Central Cemetery of Bogotá every Monday, the day of the *ánimas,* when masses of people, mainly poor, come to pray for the lost souls of purgatory, specific or in general, and by means of this achieve magical relief from the problems of unemployment, poverty, failed love, and sorcery. Summing this up is the image ubiquitous to Colombian folk religion

Anima Sola

(on sale outside the cemetery, for instance) of the *Anima Sola*, the Lonely Soul, a young woman, chained hands uplifted and about to be consumed by fire. Behind her are massive stone walls and a barred door, apparently closed.

What the Mother's of the Disappeared do is to collectively harness this magical power of the lost souls of purgatory and relocate memory in the contested public sphere, away from the fear-numbing and crazy-making fastness of the individual mind where paramilitary death squads and the State machinery of concealment would fix it. In so courageously naming the names and holding the photographic image of the dead and disappeared, the mothers create the specific image necessary to reverse public and State memory. As women, giving birth to life, they collectively hold the political and ritual lifeline to death and memory as well.

The place of the name in terror's talk is the place occupied by literal language, pre-lapsarian, the God-given world of names. But the name is also, as State-ordained *identification*, an essential requisite of bureaucratic procedure. This meeting of God and State in the Name, no less than the strange laws of reciprocity pertaining to the folk doctrine of Purgatory and

sin, is also open to a certain appropriation in what I take to be a particularly male sphere of interaction between private and public spheres. I am referring to the history recounted (and thus collectivized) to a small public gathering in Bogotá by the Colombian Senator Iván Marulanda of how he had entered the Medellin offices of the F-2, one of the Colombian Army's many and ever-changing semi-secret units, to inquire into the whereabouts of a disappeared man. Iván was sure they were holding him, and just as surely the F-2 denied it. Forcing his way into the cells, Iván screamed out the man's name again and again, for this would be the last possible chance, and, like a miracle, the disappeared man's voice could be heard calling back. He was there. Meanwhile the police had diffused a notice to the press that the man's body had been found dead on a garbage heap in Medellin.

And in further connection with naming it should be pointed out that Iván Marulanda's name recently appeared on the Medellin Death List, along with the names of thirty-three others who have pitted their talk in public spaces against official talk. The world not only began with naming as with the original Adamic language, but may well end with it as well—perversely essentialist life and death names splicing the arbitrariness of the sign to the arbitrariness of the state's power.

But what about people like yourself caught up in such matters? What sort of talk have you got? What about myself, for that matter?

Talking Terror 5

> . . . and all the werewolves who exist in the darkness of history and keep alive that fear without which there can be no rule.
>
> Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "The Importance of the Body."

It was at a friend's place in Bogotá in late 1986 that I first met Roberto. My friend is a journalist and had told me she was worried about him. Amnesty International had gotten him a ticket out of the country, but he had not used it, and it was said that he was being shunned by his own political group as unstable. He was in his early thirties, an engineer, who in the very poor neighborhoods in the south of the city had, with a left-wing political group, been organizing meetings on silencing—on the repression of human rights. Together with another of the organizers he had been picked up from the

meeting by the army at night, taken away, disappeared, and tortured—this in a country whose army totally denies its involvement in such activities. Thus, where the official voice can so strikingly contradict reality, and by means of such contradiction create fear, does Magical Realism move into its martial form. By a miracle he had not been killed when they put him in a bag, shot him through the head, and left him for dead in a public park. Like the disappeared that return alive in dreams, he had come back, if not to a dream, in the strict sense of the term, then certainly to an unreal life-state in which, being living testimony of what the army was doing, he was in constant fear of being killed and was forced into hiding while the army mounted a campaign saying he was nothing more than a "vulgar kidnapper." They had taken his papers, without which he couldn't acquire a passport, and his lawyer was adamant that if he went to the DAS (the Security Police) to renew his papers he would never leave their offices alive. After one brief and accurate notice in the country's leading dailies, nothing more had appeared in the media. And while he was desperately afraid of being found, it was the media that, in his opinion, could keep him alive. He had to keep his name alive in the same public sphere that could kill him.

A week or so later I bumped into him in the street carrying the morning's newspaper. He told me he was going to live in Europe, or Canada, in a week. "Don't you know?" he asked. "I was disappeared. The army tortured me for two days then shot me but the bullet passed along the back of my neck." His children were with their mother in a place where there were a lot of people for protection. On hearing I was leaving for a trip west for a week or more with my wife and three children he impressed upon me: "Always make sure that if anything happens to you there will be publicity. Make sure there are journalists who know where you are going. Don't associate with anyone on the Left. Just be a tourist." To my confusion he added: "Don't wear foreign clothes." He had a file on what he called "my case," and I said I would like to help.

Around five o'clock one afternoon he called without giving his name. "Do you know who is talking?" was his way of saying who he was. He wanted to meet at a busy supermarket and I went straight away. Approaching the meeting I began to feel nervous and scanned the cars for police spies. Everything started to look different, wrapped in the silent isolation of unknowable or ambiguous significance. He was pacing the pavement and I

tried to make it look to anyone watching as if it was a delightful and unexpected encounter. He not quite so much. I said I had to buy bread. We entered the supermarket together with many women pushing one another in a ragged queue at the bread counter. I invited him to our place but he wanted to go to his so we walked there, in a roundabout way. There was a public phone on the corner and he asked if I wanted to call Rachel, which struck me as strange and I said I didn't.

He lived in a basement apartment which, to get into you had to pass through two doors, one after the other, each with two locks. He was clean and neat in a light brown sports coat and open shirt. The corridor leading to the apartment was dark and damp and he took a long time to open the second door. I struggled to find a topic of conversation. We entered into a vault-like space with a thick corrugated milky-green plastic roof over a tiny dining place. The apartment had been the courtyard of a three-storied house. Further inside there was a neatly made dark blue covered double bed with a white clothes cupboard forming one wall. There were three pairs of shoes neatly laid out. It was a friend's apartment and he said he had to leave in two days. More and more the place gave me the feeling of a cage or of a laboratory, with us both keepers and kept, experimenters and subjects of someone's experiment.

He sat me down at the tiny table littered with newspaper cuttings and magazines, a half-empty bottle of *Aguardiente Cristal,* and the remains of a giant bottle of Coca-Cola. There was one upright chair. "What would you like?" he asked. "Whatever you've got," I answered. He moved about awkwardly, groping for something to do, I suppose, and put a cutting in front of me. Very tidily blue-inked on the margin it read *El Espectador* 12.IV.86. There were photos of two young men. The one on the left was said to have been killed. The second was said to be Roberto, but he was unrecognizable to me without his beard, his mouth bashed wide, and two policemen watching him as he walked through a door. The article repeated what my journalist friend had told me about him being disappeared, and Roberto told me, in wonder, that the very park where the army disposed of him dead inside the bag was where ten years ago he had crash-landed in a plane in which all the passengers died except for him and one other.

As I read, trying to concentrate, I became aware not of being anxious—that would have been too direct, too honest a self-appraisal of what was

going on—but of trying to repress wave after wave of foaming fear and thereby, somehow, merely through the awareness of the force of that repression, feeling in control instead of fearful. I remembered how only eleven days before, arriving at the airport at night after a year away from the country, we had been stopped abruptly out on the dark and isolated highway by men saying they were police. They went through our bags as if they were tearing them apart, saying they were looking for arms. Luckily there was a friend in a car behind with the lights on making it, I suppose, harder for them to screw us around and we were able, after showing them our papers from the local university, to resume our journey. "There are stories going around," a friend later told me, "of a certain general's bodyguard dressing up as airport police at night and hitting people up." Other people said it was because of a rumor that an important member of the M 19 guerrilla had flown in that day. Nobody could explain it, of course, but inexplicability is not the best thing to acknowledge in these situations of terror as usual as one fumbles with contradictory advice and rumors. In my notebook I had jotted down a short time later, having listened to many friends talking about "the situation"—"It all sounds so incredibly awful. And after two days I'm getting used to it." Roberto fussed around, poured a shot of *aguardiente* for me and fussed some more with copies of cuttings concerning his case. He couldn't find his keys, and I realized that you couldn't get out without them. Then we found them and he left without a word, the locks grating—all four of them—leaving me alone in the white cage whose door was reinforced on the inside by heavy gauge wire mesh, also painted white. I tried to read on, propelled by some dubious notion that this was being helpful, that this was what he clearly wanted me to do; to witness and to follow, in retrospect, the trajectory and ultimate disappearance of his case and hence his very being through the media trails of the public sphere while all the while there was a fluttering sensation which as soon as I was aware of it went away. It recurred, stronger. I felt I was being set up. I tried to read more but my eyes only flicked over the pages. Not a sound. A few minutes went by. I realized nobody knew where I was other than Roberto. Why hadn't I called Rachel? I looked up at the roof. It was only corrugated plastic. Almost transparent. Surely easy to break through? But then these places were built to be burglar-proof, and looking more closely it didn't seem that easy. But this was absurd. He'd be back soon. I was a miserable

coward. I tried to read more of the cuttings. My eye was caught by random phrases, exacerbating the tension—as if all that horrific stuff scattered across the table in the feeble light of the Bogotá gloom filtered through the plastic was about what was about to happen to me. I had premonitions of how I would feel and to what desperate lengths I would go if I panicked. I didn't feel or allow myself to feel panicky at that stage. That was the most curious thing. I saw myself from afar, as it were, in another world, going crazy, not knowing what was happening, what was being plotted, what would happen next, unable to breathe. I looked again at the door with its tough wire. Immovable. It was raining hard. Every now and then a few drops fell through onto my head and neck. I turned back to the crumpled cuttings from the newspapers and the cheap Xerox copies of letters between institutions and government agencies and then, truly, waves of panic flooded over me absolutely unable to move waiting for the police to surge through the door. Any moment. Dark suits. Machine guns waving. Machismo ejaculated in the underground opera of the State. The handcuffs—*esposas*, in Spanish, also means wives—grinding into your wrists. Later, recounting what had happened to friends who lived all their life in Bogatá, I was made to realize that this fear was not without foundation since it is said to be not uncommon for victims of police or army brutality to become informers.

Then the door opened and in came Roberto with a small bottle of *aguardiente*. I was relieved but wanted to leave. The rain drummed down. Even the elements were against my leaving. He pulled up a stool by my side and poured a drink into two tiny olive-green plastic tumblers. "I'm not a drunk, Miguel," he said, and proceeded to tell me how he was tortured, how bad it was when they changed the handcuffs for rope, how he felt like drowning with the wet towel stuffed down his mouth, and what it was like being in the bag and shot but not killed. He leant his head forward almost onto my lap and guided my finger through the hair to the soft bulging wounds of irregularly dimpled flesh. "Like worshipers with Christ's wounds," murmured a friend days later to whom I was telling this.

"Surely the army knows you are here?" I asked. "No!" he replied, "I've learnt the skills of the urban guerrilla," and reaching for a blue writing pad he told me that he spent nearly all his time in the apartment and that he was writing about his case, trying, for instance, to win the attorney general over to his side and not believe in the campaign of defamation spread by the

army. The attorney general had served as a judge in the small town in Antioquia where Roberto had been raised—malnourished from the start, he noted, in a large peasant family, and unable to walk until he was twenty-one months old after which, as a teenager, he had become a famous athlete. All this was in the letter to the attorney general.

He asked what I thought about his case and showed me more correspondence with Amnesty International. I mumbled about people I knew and ways of getting his story publicized, but I felt overwhelmed by the situation. Then he sprung it on me. "Could I stay in your apartment when you leave?" My heart sank. I so much wanted to help but to have him use the apartment would be to endanger a whole bunch of other people, beginning with Rachel and the three kids. I felt the most terrible coward, especially because my cowardice took the form of not being able to tell him that I thought his situation was too dangerous, for that would tear open the facade of normalcy that I at least felt we so badly needed in order to continue being and being together and that he needed to survive. In so many ways I too was an active agent in the war of silencing.

I feel terrible and less than human. I've become part of the process which makes him paranoid and a pariah. I am afraid of the powers real and imagined that have tortured and almost killed him. Even more I'm afraid and sickened by the inevitability of his paranoiac marginalization, people being suspicious of his miraculous escape, interpreting it as a sign of his possibly being a spy. And in the state of emergency which is not the exception but the rule, every possibility is a fact. Being victimized by the authorities doesn't stop with actual physical torture or the end to detention. In Roberto's "case" that's only the beginning. In a way he didn't come back to life at all. He's still disappeared, and only his case exists to haunt me in this endless night of terror's talk and terror's silence.

Talking Terror 6

An hour later I was with my kids at the Moscow Circus, which was playing in a sports arena by one of the freeways ringing the inner city. It was unreal enough, but coming on top of the episode at Roberto's it was devastatingly so. The rain was pelting down outside in the pitch-black night onto the heads of thin-faced hungry people clamoring for attention selling

candies and peanuts while, in their rough-cut woolen uniforms the police—perhaps the very ones that had participated in Roberto's disappearance—maintained order with their sad sullen faces as we moved inside into another world where joy and expectancy shone from people's faces, so far from the fears and suspicions outside. Here we were immersed in quickly shifting scenes of clowns, trapeze artists, balance, strength, tension, as the performers spun in their glittering costumes. The pink mobile flesh, firm and muscled, of the acrobats in their gold and silver tights made me think of my finger on Roberto's wounds. Laughter and wonder rippled through the crowd. But what I remember most of all was the beginning. In the shifting tube of light formed by the spotlight in the immense darkness of the arena, two Colombian clowns were arguing with one another and in the process beating up a life-sized female mannequin. They began to tear the mannequin to pieces and beat it onto the ground with fury as the crowd laughed. Then the lights changed, music blared, and a disembodied voice came on:

"In 1986, this year of World Peace, we are proud to present. . . ."

This talk was given to the conference on "Talking Terrorism: Paradigms and Models in a Postmodern World," organized by the Institute of the Humanities of Stanford University, February, 1988.